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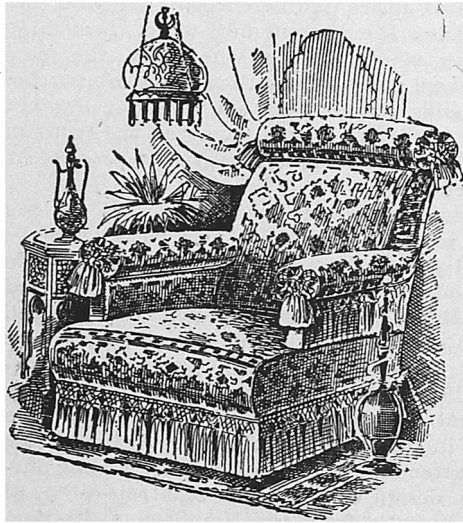
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THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

AMATEUR HOUSE DECORATION.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE EDINBURGH ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION, BY JOHN MARSHALL, M. A.

PART I.



THERE would be little novelty in the description of the house wherein first my household altar was set up some ten or eleven years ago. It was the usual conventional type, with, in the dining-room, the regulation set of mahogany chairs with morocco seatings; the sideboard all bossed with fruits and flowers, mechanically carved and casually glued, and the big mirror behind, so arranged that the light from the window lost

all its shadow, and the room was converted by uncomfortable reflections, into an uneasy chamber of *doppelgangers*; green rep curtains on the windows, dark red Brussels carpet all over the floor—all very handsome and costly and, to one's present sight, abominable. The drawing-room, with its round center table, neatly bearing in a kind of wheel-spoke pattern, layers of albums and other polite literature; its bright, red carpet, over which large flowers of white and yellow impossibly disported; its Nottingham lace curtains, two yards sprawling on the floors; and, above all, the "splendid" chiffonier, with its "noble" glass above a noble slab of marble, and its three doors beneath, each with its sheet of plate glass reflecting your boots and lower integuments in pleasing detachment from the reflection of your waistcoat above.

Who has not seen all this—who may not see its like even now in thousands of decent households here and elsewhere? One imagines that there is a certain kind of repose about it all—that people who leave their furnishings to the ogre calling himself an upholsterer, and never bother what their rooms look like, have so much more time and intellect to devote to other and more important things. Yet I confess this hardly tallies with my own experience. One does not find these unæsthetic people so very wide in their other interests, so entertaining in their conversation, so lofty in their aims. From my personal experience I am inclined to believe that, not infrequently, awakening to the claims of beauty in the house, coincides, in time and in circumstance, with awakenings to most besides that is human and humane, and that character may often manifest itself in the external surroundings of a man as soon and as certainly as in his speech, or conduct.

And the reason is, that what may primarily be objected to in the aspect of so many houses, and, among the rest, to one's own as it once was, is not its violation of some rules of taste, some abstract canons of art that neither these people nor I had ever heard of. The one absolutely irredeemable thing about such methods of furnishing is, that they are the result of an external dictation, of canons which are in no sense a part of the people themselves. The trouble is that so many people simply furnish their houses at hap-hazard, and in the main insist on nothing but that they shall be as like those of the mob around them as possible. It is the lack of individuality in it all which is the worst, nay, the only essentially bad, thing about it.

Holding this view, one need not hesitate to say at once that the modern so-called æsthetic movement, so far as it is simply a new fashion in furniture and wall papers which people are to follow with the same sheep-like silly conformity as they followed the old, is to my mind, in no essential superior to the old fashion, and will inevitably show that it is not ere long, by developing into monstrosities of form and color, as absurd and grotesque as any that have preceded it. Few people seem to be aware that what may be termed the early Victorian style of furniture, with its strange twists and bosses in the wrong places, its uncomfortable bandy legs, and general splayness of outline, had a

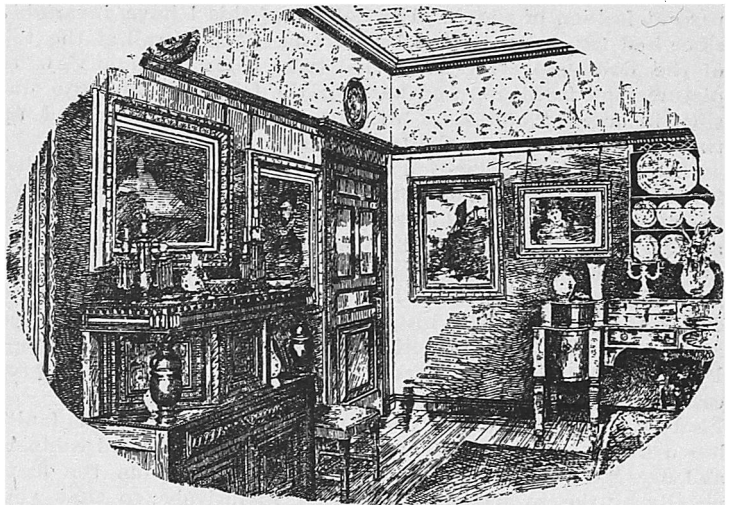
definite history of its own, and was, in fact, the final outcome, the ultimate bathos of fashions that grew out of and at last destroyed one of the most brilliant styles of furniture decoration that the world has ever seen. Just as biologists discover in some paltry crawling oddity of nature, the last attenuated specimen of an order of life once great and prosperous, so in the poor monstrosities of the common drawing-room of our own period, we have the last vulgarization of the magnificent art of the period of Louis Quatorze.

The history of all art revivals, more especially in decorative art, has been very much the same. In reaction from prevalent monotony and meaningless extravagance, some man of genius, consciously or unconsciously, flies back for new inspiration to that one perennial and pure source of all art inspiration, the Art of Greece. To some extent he becomes an imitator of that art, and is so far weak; to some extent he gets an insight into its spirit, and so far he is strong. Filled with this spirit he meets the wants of his own day, and satisfies them with dignity and freshness; he is an iconoclast, but he is also a creator, and sooner or later he conquers what after all is mere senseless negation and inanity—he inaugurates a new style. Then comes the period of imitation, and fashion and general vulgarization. Men who are incapable of comprehending the new spirit, seize the new forms, and, by all kinds of unmeaning expansions and modifications, convert them, sooner or later, into a monstrous jargon, which the majority accept because they knew no better, until the last spark of the fresh fires dies out in inanity and bathos. Gothic, Renaissance, Jacobean, Louis Quatorze, Louis Seize, Queen Ann, Empire, New Gothic, all alike have had this general history.

But the special danger with regard to the present very genuine movement is, that in these days of rapid transmission and realization of ideas, through steam and printing press, and so forth, the whole history of the movement, from the early germ to final extinction, may crowd into a few years instead of spreading over half a century.

Amidst the strain and rush of all these windy movements of fashion, there remain always a few houses at least which are really well furnished; those, namely, in which every single bit of furniture and decoration has its existence there, and its place and its use, for reasons special to the families who possess them. Such houses have *race* in them; they are significant, and have that final and essential charm which comes of real human feeling that having passed through cultivated personal thought, has become fixed in appropriate form.

The quality of good furnishing is, to my mind, exactly the quality of a good picture; it is true and complete expression of noble human feeling, not abstracted from, but rather realized through, individual character and style. Hence it is that such a thing as a really badly furnished house, which is also an old house—a house, that is, which the same people and their forbears have inhabited for a century or more, is almost inconceivable. The successive experiences of such a house, with its births,



HUMANIZING THE DINING ROOM.

and marriages, and deaths; its merrymakings and its solemnities; and its stillnesses of real life between,—these things tend to eliminate from use every object not really congruous with the character of this family as a whole, and to leave what remains steeped in reality, and therefore appropriate and beautiful.

I came home and felt that the whole thing was a hopeless

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horror. Luckily for me, just then I was called on to remove to Oxford, which gave me the excuse for a general elimination of all our wretched household goods, except some few heretofore despised old tables and chairs that had lingered neglected in bedrooms, now to reappear with the honor they deserved in our re-constructed Oxford drawing-room.

Our house in Oxford was an old one, with low ceilings and ordinary windows with ordinary panes; and the ease with which these rooms lent themselves to decoration has given me a great love for the old fashioned low ceilings. I think if I were building a house I should have no ceiling higher than ten or twelve feet, and I should use the spare four or five feet as a sort of ventilating chamber above, so that we should have the benefit of the fresh air without the ugly wall like appearance of our



SHAPING THE PARLOR.

present fashion of rooms. For default of this I have invariably since had my walls divided by a strong wooden rail at the top of the doors—covering only the walls below with a view to pictures and furniture, and keeping the frieze above quite distinct in broader and more brilliant style of decoration, led up through the cornice to the true ceiling.

And here let me mention the two maxims on which I started furnishing anew—maxims both of them learned from my artist friend in London. The first was not to be in a hurry to furnish at all; the second, not to buy, as a rule, more than one thing at a time, but that something, up to the measure of my means, intrinsically and artistically fine. The friend I have referred to did without furnishing his drawing-room for three years after he was married. The practical results of these maxims are—First, you are always furnishing; your work is always in process; your rooms are never perfect but always progressing.

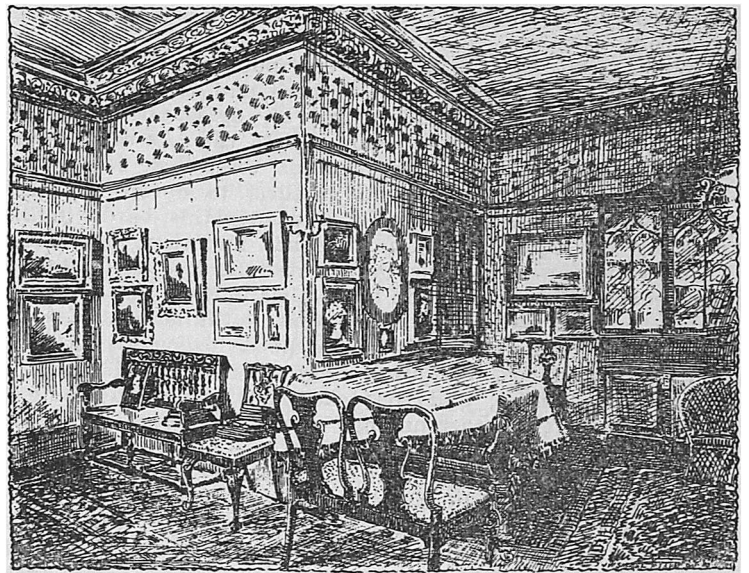
Few things are, to my mind, more dreary than your faultless drawing-room, where every picture, and chair, and cabinet, and decoration has been carefully thought of from the first, usually by the professional decorator exclusively; so that you feel that the inhabitants are under a kind of spell, and could not exercise the slightest freedom, or *caprice* if you like, without total confusion and ruin. I may say there is hardly an article of furniture I possess, other than the beds and their belongings, that has not been, or could not be, in dining-room, drawing-room, hall, morning-room, study, or bedroom, exactly as one chose; and I think one could engage to get a good effect out of any tolerably reasonable selection for any of these rooms whatever.

The *second* result is, that every thing you possess has some individual interest about it: It received its own meed of attention at the buying; like a new member of the family, it has had to shake down into relation with every other; it has had various experiences in the process, and has to the knowledge of its owners, many other possibilities about it than the actual place it now occupies can realize.

The *third* result is, that you are perfectly independent of fashion. It is a matter of entire indifference to one who has furnished thus, what phases the present notions of furnishing may undergo. His plans of furnishing were not the mere reflection of any one of them; the articles themselves are not the products of any such passing phase; they are works of art, not amazingly fine, possibly, but at all events genuine—the fruits of real skill, and the incorporation of whole centuries of progressive development in artistic culture.

One is glad to find that the divorce which subsisted so long in England between art so-called—by which was meant picture and statue making—and practical trade furnishing is coming to an end. Every fine period of art of any kind has been a period in which the artist and the artisan were approximately one and not two persons. In the great Gothic period the sculptors were decorators in stone, and brass and iron; the painters were decorator of walls and ceilings. So it was in Italy and Germany in the times of Giotto and Albert Durer; so it was in our own Jacobean art; so it was in the great decorative revival of Louis XIV; so it was in the latter half of the last century among ourselves. I discern in the design of the tazza and salt-cellar of Henri Deux ware, sold recently from the Hamilton Collection, the same grand architectural character as moulded the dome of St. Peter's, or the Baptistery at Pisa. The Jacobean design is as visible in our fine old oak cabinets and chests as in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The classic grace of the architecture of Chambers and the brothers Adams, is equally visible in the furniture of Chippendale and Sheraton, down to the very pepper-dishes, and salt-cellars, and trays, and cruets, of Sheffield plate, that we are all hunting after now.

The house of a newly married couple can seldom be beautiful in the full sense of the term. Like their lives it must be, for a time, a kind of jargon, made beautiful only by love and



DECORATING THE LIBRARY.

hope; they want time to know how to live with each other, and they want time for the same reason, to know how to furnish. When the decorator and upholsterer, however skillful and however artistic, have done their best or their worst for them, the real beautifying process only then begins through the slow and cautious modification of every little bit in response to the real character and actual lives of the inhabitants. That the final results, of course, may be, not relatively beautiful only as significant of honorable and kindly lives, but absolutely beautiful as significant also of cultivated thought and feeling, the inhabitants themselves must love beauty, and must learn to know and to feel the beautiful in nature and in art of all kinds—the conscious must go along hand in hand with the unconscious; we must be ourselves, but we must also, in a way, be followers of, nay, lose ourselves in, the great men who have been before us.

(To be continued.)